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I.—WILLIAM GODWIN AS A SENTIMENTALIST

I

Virtually all the current discussions of William Godwin devote the bulk of their attention to the elucidation of the anarchic social philosophy of his *Political Justice* (1793), and, as a rule, they give serious consideration to his first subsequent novel, *Caleb Williams* (1794). They deal perfunctorily and apologetically with *St. Leon* (1799), and generally refuse to extend their discussion beyond it so as to include *Fleetwood* (1805), *Mandeville* (1815), *Cloudesley* (1830), and *Deloraine* (1833). There is, indeed, much to be said for this lapsing of the spirit of inquiry, as any reader of the uninspired minor fiction of the eighteenth and early nineteenth century knows. But the neglect of Godwin's novels and, more particularly, the failure to examine their relationship to *Political Justice* result, I think, in a misconception of their tendencies and the diverse nature of their appeal to his generation. Pre-occupation with *Political Justice*, and, in a less degree, with *Caleb Williams*, has thrown into bold relief the frigid

rationalistic elements in Godwin's thought. This is, of course, the place where the emphasis belongs in a discussion of Godwinism, but at the same time this point of view overlooks some important qualities of his later work. The fact is that a reader coming to Godwin's novels would, unless he were very observant and analytic, have difficulty in distinguishing between Godwin's fiction and the sentimental literature with which he was already familiar. He would find that whatever might be his theory, in practice, at any rate, Godwin reveals a constant inclination for the rhapsodic and lachrymose situations of contemporary literature. Certainly the reader would discover little emotional restraint in Deloraine's description of Emilia as "a being just descended from celestial spheres, new lighted on the earth" or in the account of Julian, who, haunting Cloudesley's grave, "threw himself on his knees on the earth, kissed the turf that covered the dead body of his protector." These are the usual excesses of Rousseauistic children, a Saint Preux, a Werther, or a René, but they create an unexpected impression in the work of a recognized rationalist. In this paper the object is to take full account of Godwin's sentimental tendencies and to attempt to show their relationship to his rationalism. If we can explain this paradoxical union of reason and feeling, we shall, perhaps, understand even better than before why he had such a profound influence upon his contemporaries.

The sentimentalism of Godwin's novels may well raise a question whether they break completely with the spirit of *Political Justice*, or whether they are a development of some of its tendencies. The truth would seem to be that sentimentalism was already implicit in *Political Justice*, but disguised by Godwin's cold intellectual statement of his principles. Great as were his obligations to Swift, and

more particularly to the French Encyclopædists for the rationalistic elements in his philosophy, it is significant that he did not adopt their view of human nature. Helvétius and Holbach, following such thinkers as Hobbes and Mandeville in England and La Rochefoucauld in France, believed that, as man in his conduct is governed entirely by his feelings of pleasure and pain, he always selfishly considers his own welfare and performs only such actions as he feels assured will give him an agreeable sensation. The ultimate consequence of this doctrine is the denial of the reality of genuinely altruistic conduct, and Helvétius is consistent when he declares that when Brutus sacrificed his son to his love for his country, he was actuated by the purely egoistic motive of self-gratification.¹ According to this view, actions which we describe as "good" because their results are beneficial, are, as a matter of fact, essentially selfish. Believing, however, with other utilitarians that as the constitution of social life demands, the effect of man's conduct should be the achievement of "the greatest good of the greatest number," Helvétius argues that that result can be brought about only by an appeal to self-love; so that the individual, purely out of regard for himself, will be induced to perform actions of public benefit. At heart, both Helvétius and Holbach were genuine philanthropists; one has only to read their books to realize that the sympathy which these two men of wealth and social position had for the suffering in the world, adequately answers the cynicism of their doctrines. Nevertheless, no one can deny that the tendency of their theory of morals is to degrade human nature and to cheapen and vulgarize virtue by polluting its very source.

From first to last, Rousseau protested with all the power

¹ *De l'Esprit* (1758), Discours II, ch. v.

of his eloquence against the conclusion of the sceptical philosophers like Hobbes and Helvétius who claim man by nature is egoistic. In Rousseau's opinion they have erred in attributing to innate viciousness passions that are the result of a bad education and an abnormal social system. It is Rousseau's conviction that the benevolent impulses which in a state of nature restrain man from injuring his neighbor and supply the place of law, are instinctive, and derive their validity, not from the reason, but from the feelings. Indeed, they exist prior to reason and impel us without reflection to hasten to the aid of persons in distress. One sentence of quotation is enough to define Rousseau's position, "Je n'ai qu' à me consulter sur ce que je veux faire; tout ce que je sens être bien est bien; tout ce que je sens être mal est mal."²

Godwin's conception of human nature contains elements in agreement and elements in disagreement with the views of both Rousseau and Helvétius. On the one hand, he is most decisively in opposition to Rousseau's doctrine that emotional intuitions are the source of moral sanction, and with his usual precision of phrase characterizes what he regards as the evil of charity, unregulated by reason:

Philanthropy, as contradistinguished to justice, is rather an unreflecting feeling than a rational principle. It leads to an absurd indulgence, which is frequently more injurious than beneficial, even to the individual it proposes to favor. It leads to a blind partiality, inflicting calamity without remorse upon many, perhaps, in order to promote the unorganized interest of a few.³

On the other hand, Godwin joins with Rousseau in his rejection of the "selfish theory," and speaks with disap-

² *Emile*, Livre iv, p. 257 (*Œuvres Complètes*, Paris, 1905).

³ *Political Justice* (London, 1798), vol. i, book iv, chapter v, Appendix.

proval of the cynicism of La Rochefoucauld.⁴ The essence of his argument in behalf of disinterestedness is that benevolent actions performed, in the first instance, to exempt ourselves from a disagreeable sensation at the sight of others' pain, become, in the course of time, through the operation of habit, genuinely altruistic, and are then performed for their own sake; moreover, the tendency to consider our neighbor's good is continually strengthened by motives which reason advances in favour of such actions. But though he is here denying the conception of human nature which both Helvétius and Holbach had supported, yet Godwin did not reject their criterion of virtue. Like them, a rigid utilitarian, Godwin sets up the public benefit as the goal of all moral conduct, but whereas Helvétius and Holbach had claimed that to induce men to act for the public good an appeal must be made to their self-love, Godwin relies upon disinterestedness and the understanding to supply sufficiently powerful altruistic motives to accomplish the same result. So Godwin, under the guidance of Hume, disentangles utilitarianism from the meshes of the "selfish theory."

In the issue Godwin's conception of human nature made him perilously sympathetic with Rousseauistic moods. Both Godwin and Jean-Jacques were favorably disposed toward human nature *per se*, and it made little difference

⁴*Political Justice*, vol. I, book IV, chapter X. In a letter to his friend, Thomas Wedgwood, Godwin bases his judgment of Dr. Johnson on grounds that are significant in this connection: "Allow me to recommend to you a very cautious admission of the moral apothegms of Doctor Johnson. He had an unprecedented tendency to dwell on the dark and unamiable side of our nature. I love him less than most other men of equal talents and intentions, because I cannot reasonably doubt that when he drew so odious a picture of man he found some of the traits in his own bosom." Kegan Paul, *William Godwin*, vol. I, p. 312.

that one regarded a kind deed as the flowering of innate excellence, and that the other regarded it as a revelation of a noble disinterested feeling, developed by habit and pregnant with possibilities of further expansion. Neither saw in human character an egoistic force continuously and persistently antagonistic to the growth of virtuous impulses. For each, emotional susceptibility had an independent value as an indication of man's capacity for sympathy. At the same time that Godwin urges that to be truly moral, sympathy must be restrained and disciplined by reason, he lays great stress on the joy of disinterested action, and by his insistence tends to blur the distinction between benevolent action as an end in itself, and benevolent action as a stimulus to pleasurable emotion. If one wishes proof of this influence, read Godwin's account of the gratifications of a benevolent man, described in phraseology typical of the sentimental literature of the eighteenth century.

The sublime and the pathetic are barren, unless it be the sublime of true virtue, and the pathos of true sympathy. The pleasures of the mere man of taste and refinement, "play round the head, but come not near the heart." There is no joy, but in the spectacle and contemplation of happiness. There is no delightful melancholy, but in pitying distress. The man who has once performed an act of exalted generosity, knows that there is no sensation of corporal or intellectual taste to be compared with this.⁵

Although it must be admitted that such passages are of rare occurrence in *Political Justice*, yet here, at all events, Godwin exalts sympathetic feelings with so much fervor that he invites the emotional epicure, the man of "exquisite sensibility," to indulge his compassionate impulses that he may enjoy the warm thrills, the subdued, but cherished raptures of benevolence.

⁵ *Political Justice*, vol. I, book IV, chapter XI.

There are other ideas in Godwin's ethical system which point in the direction of sentimentalism. Like Helvétius, he discarded the doctrines in accordance with which man is conceived as coming into the world with definite predispositions, and in consequence he believed that man is the product of his education—or, as we should say, of his environment—that vice is “an error of judgment,” and that society is responsible for existent evil. When this theory, that character is molded by external forces beyond the control of the individual, is held by any one who, like Godwin, is of the opinion that man is not by nature egoistic, it is akin in its ultimate implications to the Rousseauistic idea of innate goodness, and flings wide open the door for sentimentalism, because it urges a beneficent tolerance that justifies the bestowal of sympathy upon every erring creature. Indeed, I think we feel this covert sentimentalism in Godwin's criticism of penal codes and in his plea that we should consider the motives of crime. In *Caleb Williams* Godwin's position is unequivocal, and certainly more than once we hear the reassuring, charitable “He meant well” of the sentimentalist.

Still another significant tendency reveals itself in *Political Justice*. Although thinkers like Helvétius and Holbach were eager for the realization of the ideal of “the greatest good of the greatest number,” yet they did not incline toward sentimentalism, because they conceived that man had to be bribed, as it were, to perform an action of social benefit. Godwin, as we have seen, was not so sceptical as to the essential nature of such actions. Man's interest in the welfare of humanity is not rooted in sordid motives of self-love, but springs from a praiseworthy satisfaction in the happiness of others. This disposition to help others, Godwin believes, has a capacity for infinite develop-

ment; for as reason gradually teaches men to prefer, to the trivial and partial good, the more comprehensive good, so human affection, now confined to one's family, friends, neighbors, and fellow-countrymen, will expand until it includes the whole of mankind. It is true Godwin's statement of his theory of universal benevolence in *Political Justice* gave deep offense to many of his contemporaries, because he insisted that this ideal could be realized only at the sacrifice of the tender domestic attachments, and that when on the point of conferring a favor, the bestower was under obligation, if he would be just, to calculate precisely who of the several possible beneficiaries was most likely to contribute most to common welfare. Before he wrote *St. Leon*, he modified the harshness of his theory, but even at this time, whatever its rationalistic bases, Godwin's ideal of universal benevolence, I think, in its general effect made an appeal to the imagination and the feelings. It glorified human nature because it rested on a faith that such a noble mode of conduct sprang from an impulse of disinterested kindliness. Moreover, however difficult and indeed impossible of fulfillment, this ideal, nevertheless, conjured up visions of benevolent achievement that would not leave the emotions cold and unmoved. Consequently it would seem fair to conclude that Godwin's utilitarian ideal brings him in sympathetic contact with the doctrine of brotherly love, derivative from Christian ethics; and although temperamentally he may not always be able to envelop his faith in human benevolence with an iridescence of emotional suggestion, as could Jean-Jacques, yet his exaltation of the philanthropist as the noblest type of character suffuses, as we shall see, much of his fiction with sentimentalism, and harmonizes its spirit with Rousseauistic literature.

In *Political Justice* Godwin summarily rejects as fanciful Rousseau's theory of man's degeneration from a state of innocence. He idealizes, however, the simple life, enriched, indeed, by intellectual pleasures, but free from titles, luxury, ostentatious wealth, and artificial standards of decorum. His individualism, as in the case of Rousseau, explains the appeal of this unadorned mode of existence. The conventional man of society cannot possess the great desideratum, absolute independence, because he stakes his happiness on external circumstances over which he has no control—money, honors, and social position. On the other hand, the man who lives in simplicity alone is free and happy, because he seeks his enjoyment, not in perishable material objects, but in the things of the spirit. Godwin does not, to be sure, glorify the apathy of ignorance, but, nevertheless, he is in sympathy with the Arcadian ideal, and in so far as he is so, he is in sympathy with the great body of sentimental literature that depicts the delights of a thatched cottage and a humble repast of curds and cream. It is clear that Godwin's praise of the simple life, and his ethical system with its emphasis on disinterestedness, its solicitude for the wrongdoer as the victim of circumstances, and its enthusiasm for universal philanthropy, suggest emotional possibilities that have little kinship with the relentless rationalism that the majority of Godwin's critics have led us to associate with his name.

II

When we turn to Godwin's novels, we discover that these principles of which we suspected the tendency in *Political Justice*, now clearly define themselves in their application to such a concrete problem as the creation of character and situation. What was implicit in Godwin's

theory that man is only what circumstances have made him, is now explicit and proves a fruitful source of sentimentalism. In *Caleb Williams* a spirit of too great tolerance is conjured up, and, in many cases, our sympathies are enlisted in behalf of those who ordinarily are the objects of social censure. Falkland, accomplished man of the world, discriminating appreciator of literature, possessor of all those qualities which are the flower of a noble heart, candor, humanity, and "ardent enthusiasm," commits murder, but deserves our pity because he fell a sacrifice to a mistaken ideal of honor. As Caleb—sagacious youth—comments: "If he have been criminal, that is owing to circumstances; the same qualities under other circumstances would have been, or rather were, sublimely beneficent." Moreover, Godwin undertakes to stir up our feelings by a long procession of wretched creatures, victims of the maladministration of justice and irrational penal codes, all of whom, with sentimental exaggeration, he graces with striking virtues. One might infer that a prison was the abiding place of moral energy and even culture. Hawkins and his son, both worthy fellows, are subjected to diabolical persecution by their landlord, Tyrrel, and can obtain no legal redress. In the end, although they are innocent, they are executed for Tyrrel's murder, merely on circumstantial evidence. A peasant who has accidentally killed a man that had insulted him, is forced to languish a long time in prison before he is tried. "He also was innocent, worthy, and benevolent." Brightwel—the very name is calculated to set susceptible emotions gently vibrating—is "a common soldier of a most engaging physiognomy . . . and accustomed to draw his favorite amusement from the works of Virgil and Horace;" and yet his refined culture does not save

him from imprisonment for theft on slight evidence and death from a disease contracted while awaiting his trial. In confessing to "a melancholy pleasure" in the recital of his troubles, Caleb identifies himself with the host of sentimentalists who make capital out of their own and others' misery. Obviously Godwin has made the prison scenes the vehicle of insufficiently motivated feelings by an exaggerated appeal to our pity.

The sentimental attitude toward vice receives even a more significant exemplification. Inspired by his distrust of established authority and his rampant individualism, Godwin follows in the footsteps of Schiller and idealizes the social outcast. There is no need to describe Caleb's experiences among the thieves who, though they were unfortunately "habituated to consider wounds and bludgeons and stabbing as the obvious mode of surmounting every difficulty," were, in general, "strongly susceptible of emotions of generosity." Raymond, the robber chief, in *Caleb Williams*, is dignified by his integrity and magnanimous spirit, but he still retains his resemblance to average humanity. In his delineation of St. Elmo, the robber chief in *Cloudesley*, however, Godwin casts aside all restraint and provides him with a splendor of virtue. He assures us, "He would have been distinguished among savages, among the feudal followers of Charlemagne, or among the crusaders, as well as in the wars of Camillus and Scipio, or in the heroic games of Olympia."⁶ He and other young Corsican nobles had cherished an ambition to liberate their country, but when their hope was cruelly disappointed, they had retired in bitter disillusionment "to the caves and dens of earth," resolved, at all cost, to preserve their independence. With the impudence of a

⁶ *Cloudesley—A Tale* (3 vols., London, 1830), III, p. 84.

shameless individualist, St. Elmo "regarded what is called civilized society as a conspiracy against the inherent rights of man, and determined to pay no attention to its regulations."⁷ When these heroic bandits die upon the scaffold, Godwin's sympathy, as usual, is with the criminals, and not with society. Certainly the ethical fallacy that shifts all responsibility for wrong doing from the transgressor to the community opens the floodgates of compassion, and would invite to tears the reader of "acute sensibility."⁸

Other sentimental elements reveal themselves in Godwin's novels. His belief in disinterestedness and exaltation of benevolence leads him to endow all his virtuous characters with delicacy of feeling. Reason indeed does not always discipline their emotions; for, acutely sensitive to suffering or to nobility in others, without any effort at reserve they give way to pity or lapse into raptures of admiration. When Mandeville discovers his beloved Mary in a peasant's cottage, helping a "poor old friend" who is ill, he cries: "It was a sight on which an angel might have dwelt with rapture."⁹ Lord Alton possesses the fine taste of a man of feeling in his appreciation of the thrilling appeal of distressed beauty. Having rescued a fair young Greek from Turkish pursuers, he confesses: "Beauty in sorrow is the adversary that has thrown down its arms, and no longer defies us to conquer its powers. It is the

⁷ *Cloudesley*, III, p. 109.

⁸ In her tragedy, *Rayner*, Joanna Baillie represents the hero as associated temporarily with a robber-band, but her treatment of the situation is in no sense anti-social. In *The Borderers* Wordsworth employs the convention of the noble robber to expose Godwinian fallacies.

⁹ *Mandeville—A Tale of the Seventeenth Century in England* (3 vols., New York, 1818), vol. III, pp. 124 seq.

weak and tender flower, illustrious in its lowliness, that asks for a friendly hand to raise its drooping head.”¹⁰ St. Leon is extravagant in his grief for his mother; Travers in *Deloraine* and Julian in *Cloudesley* are no less so upon the death of a friend. All three haunt the graveyard to cull from the mound that covers their dead, flowers of sweetest woe. St. Leon, with the feeling peculiar to sentimental characters, seeks his mother’s burial place “when nature assumed her darkest tints,” and Travers with equal judgment resorts to William’s grave “by the light of the starry heavens,” both evidently realizing how the midnight hour subtly enhances the pleasure of melancholy brooding.

Godwin is also faithful to the traditions of sentimental literature when he represents Caleb, Brightwel, Falkland, Fleetwood, Emily, and Laura, all finely responsive to the beauties of poetry. Obviously the sentimentalist cherishes the appreciation of poetry, because it betokens a heart quivering with feeling, and he finds in verse the stimulus he craves. Often emotional sympathy draws together two tender hearts. Werther’s reading of *Ossian* precipitated a passionate scene with Charlotte. For Godwin also, literature is the link of sympathy between Fleetwood and Mary, Deloraine and Emilia, and Travers and William. Godwin, too, was loyal to the Petrarch cult of eighteenth-century sentimental fiction. In *St. Leon* the hero and his bride thrill in the fervor of the Italian’s sonnets. It will be remembered that the Italian was one of the few poets that Saint-Preux recommended to Julie.¹¹ Valencourt also read Petrarch to Emily, and in the copy he left with her, he underscored the passage that expressed

¹⁰ *Cloudesley*, I, p. 231.

¹¹ *La Nouvelle Héloïse*, Première Partie, Lettre XIII.

the feelings he dared not utter.¹² In her comedy, *Enthusiasm*, a satire on sentimental excess, Joanna Baillie, ridiculing this admiration for Petrarch, represents Lady Worrymore as crying: "O I have worshipped Petrarch, dreamt of him, repeated in my sleep all his beautiful conceptions, till I have started from my couch in a paroxysm of delight."¹³ In these rhapsodies over poetry what is most evident is the entire absence of any definite principles of literary criticism. The effect upon the feelings—that is the sole test. Such a test, founding its validity in the capricious taste of every reader, is characteristic of an age of individualism, and indicates Godwin's detachment from the rationalistic standards of classicism.¹⁴

In the discussion of *Political Justice* we pointed out how Godwin's individualism led him to adopt, except for some modifications of his own, Rousseau's theory of the advantages of the simple life. Beginning with *St. Leon* and continuing through his subsequent fiction, he draws

¹² *The Mysteries of Udolpho* (3 vols., Exeter, 1834), vol. I, ch. VI, p. 55.

¹³ Act I, Scene II. In *Sense and Sensibility* (chapter III) Marianne objects to Edward Ferrars as a lover because he read Cowper "with such impenetrable calmness, such dreadful indifference."

In *Sainclair* Mme. de Genlis thus describes the sensibility of the young widow Clotilde: "Tout la portoit à l'attendrissement; l'amitié, les arts, le spectacle de la nature; la lecture d'un drame lui causoit des suffocations; on fut obligé de l'emporter de sa loge à l'une des représentations de *Misanthropie et Repentir*."—*Œuvres de Madame de Genlis* (Paris, 1825), LIV, p. 207.

¹⁴ Rousseau, of course,—and in this respect especially Mme. de Staël is his disciple—gives an important place to emotion in criticism. Referring to Lord Bomston, Saint-Preux writes to Julie: "Il me parla cependant des beaux-arts avec beaucoup de discernement, mais modérément et sans prétention. J'estimai qu'il en jugeait avec plus de sentiment que de science, et par les effets plus que par les règles, ce qui me confirma qu'il avait l'âme sensible" (Première Partie, Lettre XLV).

the familiar roseate pictures of patriarchal existence. In the narrative of St. Leon's pastoral life at Soleure and later his sojourn at the cottage on the Lake of Constance, in the account of M. Ruffigny's Swiss home in *Fleetwood*, and in the description of the rural charms of the Willis cottage in *Mandeville* with its delightful garden where, as in Julie's, "the trees were unshorn" and "the walks were neither straight nor forced into strange serpentizing involutions"—in all these scenes we recognize borrowing from Rousseau's Wolmar household. Godwin sentimentalizes over these pictures as might Jean-Jacques himself, nor are we cheated of the usual chatter about "the best ages of Rome" and the admirable habits of Regulus and Fabricius. Moreover, in the presence of the beauties of nature, Godwin's characters know no restraint whatsoever, but their whole soul expands with rapture. Godwin's attitude toward animals is significant. Uncle Toby's apostrophe to the fly and Sterne's lamentations over the ass have their parallel in Godwin's loss of perspective in his eulogy of St. Leon's dog, Charon, whose energies, he assures us, "were always employed in acts of justice and beneficence, never in acts of aggression."¹⁵ This passage was deservedly ridiculed by the anonymous author of the satire, *St. Godwin*.¹⁶ Godwin delights to describe the sentimental rescue which is an incentive for falling in love. Falkland saves Emily from a fire, in *Deloraine* William saves Margaret from drowning and his friend, Travers, from a man-eating shark, and in *Cloudesley* Lord Alton saves Irene from savage pursuers. Then, too, Godwin indulges in unrestrained rhapsodies over the "heavenly"

¹⁵ *St. Leon*, 4 vols., London, 1816; for whole episode, vol. III, pp. 17 seq.

¹⁶ *St. Godwin—A Tale of the Sixteenth, Seventeenth, and Eighteenth Century*, by Count Reginald de St. Leon, London, 1800, p. 31.

beauty and "celestial" virtue of his heroines, so that one might maliciously suggest that he did not wish to put too much reliance upon the appeal of their rationality. Be that as it may, it is certainly curious that in spite of the indignant ridicule which Mary Wollstonecraft had directed against the sentimental descriptions of women as an insult to her sex, Godwin employs the familiar extravagant jargon.¹⁷

The evidence we have gathered together is sufficient to prove that in his novels Godwin departed far from the rationalistic spirit of *Political Justice*. He has such an immoderate desire for emotion for its own sake, that, like many other sentimentalists, he makes no attempt to proportion the intensity of feeling to the importance of the object that excites it. The net result is extravagance, strained, ineffectual pathos, and frequently the defiance of common sense.

III

Two of Godwin's novels, *St. Leon* and *Fleetwood*, are deserving, I believe, of special treatment. Leslie Stephen and more recent critics, following in his footsteps, are

¹⁷ The whole passage deserves transcription as a significant criticism of prevailing taste and as a proof of the writer's extraordinary common-sense. She is speaking in particular of Dr. Fordyce's language. "Florid appeals are made to heaven, and to the *beauteous innocents*, the fairest images of heaven here below, whilst sober sense is left far behind . . . I particularly object to the lover-like phrases of pumped-up passion, which are everywhere interspersed. . . . Speak to them (women) the language of truth and soberness, and away with the lullaby strains of condescending endearment! Let themselves be taught to respect themselves as rational creatures, and not led to have a passion for their own insipid persons. It moves my gall to hear a preacher descanting on dress and needlework: and still more, to hear him address the *British fair*, and the *fairest of the fair*, as if they had only feelings" (*A Vindication of the Rights of Women*, New York, 1890, p. 150).

prone to judge them merely by standards of literary excellence, and in consequence they rightly feel that they are justified either in ignoring them completely or in discussing them with rather flippant indifference. But this method of approach, while satisfactory enough as far as it goes, neither throws light on the relation of the novels to revolutionary thought nor explains the impression they made on many of Godwin's contemporaries.¹⁸ As has been again and again emphasized, Godwin, after his marriage with Mary Wollstonecraft and in the interval between the publication of *Caleb William* and *St. Leon*, came to see the error of his inflexible statement that, under the guidance of his reason and without regard for the disquieting emotions of gratitude, patriotism, and love of kin, the individual is always under obligation to regulate his actions with a view to their ultimate utility to society, as it is thus only that he can achieve the ideal of justice and philanthropy. Godwin now admits the importance of feeling as a motive for conduct; instead of deprecating its influence, he grants its ethical justification, and in his Preface to *St. Leon* expresses the conviction that the cultivation of family affections is absolutely indispensable to the complete development of the individual, and, instead of checking, fosters wider social sympathy. Whether or not "the culture of the heart" invalidates the rationalistic theories of *Political Justice* is not the question here, and, at all events, it is a conclusion which Godwin himself denies. As we have seen, underneath the forbidding exterior of *Political Justice* and more unmistakably in *Caleb Williams*, there flowed a current of sentimentalism, and Godwin's

¹⁸ E.g., Amédée Pichot compares Godwin not unfavorably to Byron (*Essai sur la vie, le caractère et le génie de lord Byron*, Paris, 1830, p. 79).

later attitude toward the tender emotions is probably not so much a complete change of front as a consistent outgrowth of existent tendencies. The upshot is that in *St. Leon* and in all his subsequent novels this new faith in domestic affection and his doctrine of love reinforce one another and gradually merge together into a sentimental gospel of love. So impressed by *St. Leon* was Mr. Fellows, one of Anna Seward's correspondents, that he thought Godwin on the way to become a Christian and "the able champion of revelation."¹⁹ Certainly Godwin now neglects the rôle of sage for that of a hysterical rhapsodist.

In *St. Leon* Godwin shows the necessity of revising the ideals dominating the life of the individual. His method is to start his hero out in life under the guidance of false ideals, to subject him to a varied and painful experience in which his ideals, being tested, prove delusions, and, finally, to lead him by degrees to the perception of essential ethical values. St. Leon is an aristocrat, cherishing the typically false notions that wealth, display, and princely luxury, are the only means to happiness. Reduced in circumstances, he lives in retirement with his noble wife and four children what is really an idyllic existence, but he scarcely appreciates his blessings. When he learns from a stranger the secret of immortality and the philosopher's stone, all his sleeping ambitions burst into life. His imagination is inflamed by the hope of realizing splendid dreams of earthly glory and of restoring his wife and children to the position in society which was theirs by birth. With impressive, even if extravagant irony, Godwin exposes the fallacy of St. Leon's hope. His wealth

¹⁹ *Letters of Anna Seward* (6 vols., Edinburgh, 1811), vol. v, Letter LI.

increases his wants, and makes him dissatisfied with his peaceful life; and his inability to explain satisfactorily the source of his wealth estranges him from his son, breaks the heart of his wife, and entails unutterable misery upon himself.

In the terms of revolutionary philosophy what is the significance of *St. Leon*? In unmasking the hollowness of wealth, luxury, and worldly ambition Godwin meant to illuminate as truths the principle of human brotherhood and the joy and wisdom of a simple life. To these ideals *St. Leon* had, at first, been indifferent, but when it was too late, he realized their supreme value. The man who does not crave for the sympathy of his fellows, is abnormal, because, as Godwin insists, love is not an occasional or incidental need of man's nature, but a fundamental requirement of his soul. It quickens and, in fact, conditions the development of his whole spiritual being. Indeed, the possibilities of emotional life can be realized only in social communication; pleasurable feelings are intensified by the responsive joy of our fellows, and painful feelings are assuaged only by the sympathy of others. So the demands of his inmost being weave about the individual a network of a thousand ties which bind him inevitably and for his own good to the society in which he lives. Domestic affection is no longer selfish in its tendency and at variance with the principles of absolute morality, as Godwin had asserted in *Political Justice*, but it is a noble manifestation of a deeply rooted instinct. No wonder *St. Leon*, contemplating his family, cries, "What are gold and jewels and precious utensils? Mere dross and dirt. The human face and the human heart, reciprocations of kindness and love, and all the nameless sympathies of our nature, these are the only objects worth being

attached to.”²⁰ Moreover, this affection does not blight the growth of social sympathy; rather, indeed, do the tender duties of the family circle awaken into activity a desire to help others not akin to us.

The love of wife and children does not, however, satisfy man’s need for sympathy, Godwin assures us. The dependence of the individual upon society is portrayed with poignant force in St. Leon’s awful realization that his superhuman powers have blasted a chasm between him and the whole human race. He perceives with anguish that, by reason of his exemption from earthly cares, his hopes and fears, joys and sorrows, all will be of another order, such as no mortal can comprehend. The very gift of immortality seems a curse, and he shrinks with loathing from the contemplation of the future to which he is doomed. It will be his cruel destiny to see the coming and going of successive generations of men, and love for him will be a futile passion because every mortal must inevitably be torn from him by death. “I can no longer cheat my fancy; I know that I am alone. The creature does not exist with whom I have any common language, or any genuine sympathy. Society is a bitter and galling mockery to my heart; it only shows in more glaring colors my desolate condition.”²¹ The philosophers of the “selfish theory” had claimed that man sought social intercourse not out of love of his kind, but merely for the sake of the personal material advantages which such an intercourse afforded. Godwin comes to the rescue of human nature, and shows that St. Leon, placed by his peculiar powers beyond all need of mortal assistance, craves, nevertheless, the society of men.

²⁰ *St. Leon*, I, p. 248.

²¹ *St. Leon*, IV, p. 8.

The sentimental literature of the day glorified charity. Rousseau's Julie distributes alms to beggars, and Harley in *The Man of Feeling* aids old Edwards and his family. Götz von Berlichingen befriends the oppressed, Karl Moor relieves widows and orphans and supports young men at college, Lord Nelvil in *Corinne* saves the whole town of Ancona from destruction by fire, and in Bage's novel Hermsprong, a possessor of a great fortune, who devotes his time to assisting suffering merit, succors the victims of a storm, as well as Cornish miners, who are on a strike. But the philanthropic schemes of St. Leon outstrip them all. Filled with an ambition to achieve something commensurate with his superhuman powers, he journeys to Hungary, and, assuming the function of a god, undertakes to relieve the whole nation from the misery into which it has been plunged by the war. He builds innumerable houses, imports corn, and plants a vast area with grain. Wherever he appears, he is followed by the blessings of the people; "the very children are taught with their infant tongues to lisp the virtues of the Saviour of Hungary."²²

Over against St. Leon, the lover of his species, Godwin sets the Titanic misanthrope, Bethlem Gabor. Like Karl Moor of Schiller's *Robbers*, he is the embodiment of tremendous energy, his passions have superhuman violence, and in the blindness of egoism he would annihilate the whole human race for a personal wrong. But here a very definite distinction must be drawn between Godwin's attitude toward misanthropy and that of many other writers of the romantic period. The active misanthropy of Karl Moor as well as the contempt for mankind which is

²² *St. Leon*, IV, p. 61.

implied in the *Weltschmerz* of such characters as Saint-Preux and Werther, is portrayed as an expression of cynicism that is justified by the manners and insipidity of the average man; Rousseau, Goethe, and Schiller are, in reality, voicing their own discontent. Godwin, however, did not take misanthropy as his theme because he had lost faith in human nature. Far from it. To cherish bitter feelings toward mankind, he believes, is no assurance of superiority of soul, but a spiritual misfortune, cutting off the individual from all the ennobling advantages of social intercourse. The hatred of mankind is not sanctioned because evil may exist in human nature; in truth, misanthropy betokens a lamentable blindness to the excellence that is the possession of every man, woman, and child. In its origin Godwin regards misanthropy as a perversion of the inborn human craving for love. Taking, perhaps, suggestions from the calamity that befell Macduff, Godwin represents Gabor's inveterate hatred as the result of his intense affection for his wife and children, who were slaughtered in his castle during his absence. As St. Leon, the philanthropist, tells us, he felt no repulsion in the company of Gabor, because he knew that "all the unsocial propensities that animated him were the offspring of love," and he took pleasure "in examining the sublime desolation of a mighty soul."²³

Had he possessed the lyrical power of Rousseau, Godwin's exaltation of this gospel of love would remind us more often of Jean-Jacques. At any rate, he floods his book with feeling. This excessive emotionalism has been justly struck at by the anonymous parodist of *St. Leon*, who, after burlesquing one of Godwin's domestic scenes, bursts out rapturously, "It was indeed a delicious sight,

²³ *St. Leon*, IV, p. 129.

and I think I have well described it. I am but a bad hand at sublime description, but at the tender, pathetic, *homely scene*, I do not know my equal.”²⁴ From our point of view this ridicule seems well deserved, but the fact remains, to judge from the comments of Godwin’s contemporaries, that *St. Leon* deeply impressed many of its readers. We may be assured it appealed to a host of Rousseauists who had been indifferent to the austere statement of the doctrine of benevolence in *Political Justice*. It is a book completely of its time, born of glowing optimism, and valuable as a revelation of what a revolutionary idealist thought of human nature. In its delineation of the tragedy of the individual cut off from opportunity to satisfy the longing of his being for companionship, it is in harmony with the spirit of the *Ancient Mariner* and *Frankenstein*. If other evidence were wanting, these three works would show how deeply the age was feeling about the doctrine of brotherhood.

IV

Fleetwood clarifies still further Godwin’s judgment of the unhappy individual who is bound to society by no ties of sympathy, and reveals him in reaction against that particularly ignoble form of sentimentalism, the *Weltschmerz*. In so far as that is the case, the novel is interesting as Godwin’s commentary on an emotional pose that many of his generation, and Byron is particular among Englishmen, regarded as distinctly “the correct thing” among fashionable swaggerers. Significantly enough, Godwin would cure this sentimental pessimism by a doctrine of optimism scarcely less sentimental in its own way.

²⁴ *St. Godwin*, p. 31.

Fleetwood is the spiritual brother of those languid epicures in feeling, Saint-Preux and Werther, Chateaubriand's René, Madame de Staël's Lord Nelvil, Sénancour's Obermann, and Lamartine's yet unborn Raphael. Nurtured among the wild Welsh mountains and in the pathetic solitude of a motherless childhood, Fleetwood has developed a most exquisite sensibility. After a period of dissipation on the continent, where he is deceived by two mistresses in turn, and after acquaintance with the insincerity of literary life and the corruption of politics, he realizes the chasm between the ideal and the actual and tastes all the bitterness of disillusionment. In his loneliness he travels for years to discover relief for his *ennui*, but all in vain. He finally arrives at the age of forty-five, hopeless of finding a true friend, contemptuous of all human interests, convinced of the insipidity of life and the spiritual emptiness of a world in which no one of his ideals comes to fruition. When we see Fleetwood in this mood, we expect that, like many another victim of impotent idealism, he will attempt to escape from hideous reality by suicide. Werther took the fatal step; Saint-Preux, René, Obermann, and Raphael contemplated it.

At this very point Godwin reacts, and reacts decisively, against the solution which most of his contemporaries would have given to Fleetwood's spiritual dilemma. He represents Fleetwood as becoming acquainted, at this crucial moment of his career, with Macneil, a disciple of Rousseau. This gentleman, who has a sublime faith in the essential goodness of humanity, quickly exposes the sophistry of Fleetwood's convictions. In protest against Fleetwood's contempt for man, Macneil assures him that almost every individual of the species is "endowed with angelic virtues," and that whenever he sees a man, he

recognizes him as "something to love—not with a love of compassion, but with a love of approbation."²⁵ Fleetwood's life is unnatural, because even a rapturous love of nature and of brute creation cannot satisfy man's inborn need for the society of his kind. A life of solitude is spiritually barren; to complete his existence Macneil urges Fleetwood to marry. "The discipline which arises out of the domestic charities has an admirable tendency to make man, individually considered, what a man ought to be. . . . If you are now wayward and peevish and indolent and hypochondriacal, it is because you weakly hover on the outside of the pale of society."²⁶ For a time Fleetwood shrinks from the responsibilities which marriage would thrust upon him, but finally he weds one of Macneil's daughters. Although his love for his wife is great, yet when he is forced to change his habits, his nervous irritability makes him resent every trifling sacrifice, and before he is able to adjust himself, he almost wrecks his marriage through his unreasonable jealousy. Godwin undoubtedly shows genuine psychological insight in his representation of the conflict between Fleetwood's love and his undisciplined impulses.²⁷

What is the exact bearing of Godwin's reaction against the *Weltschmerz*? In the first place, convinced of the essential solidarity of the human race and the value of social intercourse, he rejects the notion that any individual can afford to hold himself aloof from his fellows in fancied superiority. To appreciate the importance of this protest

²⁵ *Fleetwood* (2 vols., New York, 1805), II, p. 29.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, II, p. 47.

²⁷ Contrast *Fleetwood* with Constant de Rebecque's novel, *Le Mari Sentimental* (1785), in which a man of feeling marries a woman of the world and, deeply wounded by the lack of sympathy between his wife and himself, puts an end to his own life.

one has only to read the literature of the romantic period to find, constantly recurring, the idea that genius is synonymous with martyrdom; to be harried by duties from which his talent should exempt him, and to be scorned by a dull, uncomprehending world is conceived as the unhappy lot of every finer spirit.²⁸ In the second place, Godwin shows the utter futility of pursuing an unattainable ideal that alienates the individual from the world, and fallaciously enough, seems to relieve him of the necessity of doing what good lies in his power. The ideal is to be found in the actual; so Fleetwood discovers that in marriage he has realized the ideal of friendship for which he has sought so long.²⁹ Furthermore, Godwin in this novel and elsewhere argues against sentimental passivity when he insists that it is nothing less than immoral for an individual to cherish unduly painful emotions that will incapacitate him for useful benevolent activities.³⁰ That delicacy of feeling which impairs a man's energy, is only another name for selfishness. To cure the *Weltschmerz* Godwin urges the hopeless sufferer to substitute altruistic motives for the egoistic impulses governing his life. Suicide is only a cowardly escape from every man's duty to do as much good as he can in the world.³¹ In a word, then, St. Leon wrecked his life, because he did not heed the gospel of love until it was too late; Fleetwood, after a bitter spiritual struggle, carries it into practice and enjoys the blessings

²⁸ E. g., Mme. de Staël's *Corinne*. The *Hortense* of Mme. de Genlis effectively burlesques the literary affectations of *Corinne*.

²⁹ Compare: Lothario's conviction that "here or nowhere is America" (*Wilhelm Meister*, Bk. VII, Ch. III).

³⁰ *St. Leon*, III, p. 131. *Deloraine* (2 vols., London, 1833), I, p. 279; II, p. 198.

³¹ Compare Godwin's letter to a despondent friend (Kegan Paul, *William Godwin*, I, p. 142).

which St. Leon had thrown away. Godwin should, indeed, have great credit for reacting against the peculiarly morbid form of sentimentalism that flourished more on the continent than in England, and of which the victims deserve pathological investigation no less than literary study. Without question his criticism of the pessimistic pose and his recognition of the power of social intercourse to discipline and develop character show the soundest thinking, but unfortunately his tendency to believe so well of human nature that he will not tolerate the attitude of the misanthropist, is tainted more than once by almost maudlin optimism. Curiously enough, Godwin's solution of the spiritual trouble of his age is akin to Goethe's ideal of self-renunciation; but whereas in its consummation Faust's philanthropy is purged completely of egotism, the altruism of St. Leon and Fleetwood is always associated with the delicious self-consciousness of the sentimentalist, seeking opportunities for indulging his feelings and enjoying the contemplation of his own benevolence. Godwin's doctrine of philanthropy is too deeply rooted in sentimentalism to attain to the noble dignity, the restraint, and self-forgetfulness of Goethe's ideal.³²

³² It is unnecessary to discuss *Mandeville* in detail. It is sufficient to quote the most significant arguments by which Henrietta strives to reclaim her brother from misanthropy. "By the very constitution of our being we are compelled to delight in society. . . . If man could meet man in an uninhabited island how would he rejoice in his good fortune! . . . Oh, then, how should beings of this wonderful structure, hail each other's presence, love each other's good, and strain their utmost nerve, to defend each other from injury. He [i. e., man] is just what his nature and circumstances have made him. . . . If he is corrupt, it is because he has been corrupted. . . . Give him a different education, place him under other circumstances, . . . and he would be altogether a different creature. He is to be pitied therefore, not regarded with hatred;

This study has made clear that Godwin's novels more and more approach in character the typical sentimental story of the day. He repeats the conventional situations and drains them of their tears. The truth is that Godwin in *Caleb Williams*, and, to a much greater degree, in his subsequent novels, rarely sees the necessity of putting any restraint upon the expression of emotion, providing he deems the object that excites it a worthy one. His conviction that the character of every individual is determined by the forces that play upon him in his environment, enables him to regard as a martyr the man whom society has branded as a criminal, and accordingly he can indulge without compunction in the luxury of compassion. His rejection of "the selfish theory," his belief in the universal, instinctive hunger for the sympathies of social relationships, and his ideal of philanthropy stimulate the imagination and tap inexhaustible sources of feeling. Certainly, if experience does not justify Fleetwood's and Mandeville's sweeping contempt for their fellows, it no less fails to support Macneil's simple faith that every man is "fully prepared and eager to do a thousand virtuous acts the moment the occasion is afforded him."³³ We have tried to show that these sentimental tendencies are not so much a departure from, as an unfolding of, some of the principles of *Political Justice*. The rationalistic structure of Godwin's philosophy disintegrated, as it were, under the influence of ideas and emotional tendencies that he had

to be considered with indulgence, not made an object of revenge; to be reclaimed with mildness, to be gradually inspired with confidence, to be enlightened and better informed as to the mistakes into which he has fallen, not made the butt and object of our ferocity" (vol. I, pp. 190 seq.).

³³ *Fleetwood*, II, p. 31.

assimilated from Rousseauism. If our contention be correct, this discussion not only illumines the system of Godwin's own thought, but also indicates additional reasons why his influence upon his contemporaries was so great. Whether he would have admitted it is a question, but the fact is that the inmost shrine of his philosophy might be entered by way of either the reason or the feelings. The preference seems to have been for the latter way, if we can judge by the character and writings of some of his most ardent disciples, enthusiastic reformers like John Thelwall and young Shelley. Undoubtedly they conceived themselves as the advocates of a most austere intellectualism, but in reality they were responding to an appeal of a very different order.

B. SPRAGUE ALLEN.
